

Grünewald's 'The Temptation of St. Anthony' and Its Message for Our Time¹

I.

Dear friends,

What you see here is a part of the Isenheim Altarpiece in Colmar. The Altarpiece was created between 1512 and 1516. Its creator was Matthias Grünewald, a mysterious personality, about whom not much is known. We know that he was born in Aschaffenburg and that he died in 1528. His life went on in the shadow of his works. That is unusual today, but in the Middle Ages it was a frequent phenomenon. Think of the creators of the great cathedrals. Many of you have perhaps been in Chartres, where there are wonderful sculptures and stained glass windows. Usually, we have no idea who created these works.

Anonymous art - that is not fashionable nowadays. Today, the creative personality openly stands before us - and not always necessarily in an advantageous manner.

In Grünewald we have someone who speaks to us exclusively through the work that he brought to the world.

In Colmar, the location of the altarpiece, there was at that time the Order of the Antonine monks. They were an Order that cared for the sick, especially for people suffering from a particular illness that was widespread in those days known as St. Anthony's Fire (ergotism). It causes the limbs to rot, leaving only stumps. You can see a victim of this disease in the bottom left corner of the picture. This disease - it was caused by rye that was infected by a fungus - led to social exclusion, as was also later the case with leprosy. The Order of the Antonines took in such

victims. It was founded in the 11th century; it goes back to a figure named *Antonius*. But this was not the more well-known Anthony of Padua, to whom people sometimes pray when they have lost something - their car keys or their wallet.

The Anthony in the case of the altarpiece lived in Egypt as a hermit in the third century A.D. He had powerful inner experiences, through which he advanced spiritually. In the panel reproduced here we see him in the lower part of the picture undergoing the experience of a testing. On his inner path of development it is the moment of his greatest such testing.



II.

Let us try to enter into this picture slowly, step by step - to discover why this painting, before which victims of the disease were brought, was added to the altarpiece. The sick were not only brought before this picture which was a kind of reflection of their own suffering; it was at the same time supposed to be a means by which they could cope with their suffering, to *transform* it even. The painting was both a mirror and a therapy. Allow me to make a fundamental comment here. There are two kinds of art: the one can work *therapeutically*, healing one's soul; the other kind of art helps rather, to reveal the world, to *develop or refine one's interest in the world*. Expressionism or Impressionism are, within painting, only particular forms of these two kinds of art. Think,

¹ From a lecture on 1 January 2015 at Haus Stalten near Lörrach, S.W. Germany

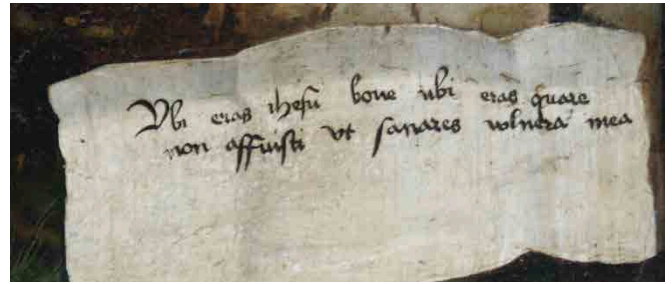
for example, of the famous “Scream” by Edvard Munch. Such a painting can liberate or, at it were, create an outlet that relieves the pressure in the soul of the onlooker who inclines in a certain direction – such as despair, and who would like to give vent to his feelings, but who still represses and “controls” them... Impressionism, on the other hand, can lead us in a new way into a deeper experience of the world and of nature.

In this work by Grünewald we are clearly presented with an expressionist work of art. It portrays processes in the soul, with which the onlooker can connect his own wounded soul and calm or even heal himself by being in contact with the painting. We have chosen this picture, because it speaks of the mystery of illness and healing, but also of the riddle of evil, the solution of which according to Rudolf Steiner is the fundamental task of our epoch.

III.

Allow me first to read to you a few words by the Freiburg philosopher of religion Bernhard Casper, who was until recently unknown to me: “In terms of form the picture makes clear that Grünewald perfectly mastered the principles of perspective; but at the same time he abandons the securities which a Renaissance painting with classical central perspective would offer, in a maelstrom of tumultuous actions. It is evident that this picture seeks to express a soul condition. It is the condition of the sufferer, which is articulated in the question ‘why?’ We would certainly be wrong to want to call this merely a ‘subjective condition’. It is much more an extremely real condition of human nature as such.” Look at the man who is turned towards the happening in the picture, who is even interwoven into it, with his dead limbs and his sick skin. “The sufferer finds himself in a condition to which he cannot say Yes. He finds himself in a condition which robs him of his being able to be united with himself.”²

Certainly, there is first the suffering of Anthony, a historical figure. *But at the same time this picture expresses the ‘Anthony crisis’ in each human soul.* We usually find an artist’s signature in the bottom left or right corner of a painting. Here, as with most of the other works by Grünewald, we find nothing of the sort. Instead, in the bottom right corner is a small piece of paper which bears an inscription. On it we read in gothic letters the words in Latin: “Ubi eras, bone Jesu, ubi eras, quare non adjuvares et vulnera mea sanares? In [English] : “Where



The piece of paper with the Question of St. Anthony

were you, good Jesus, where were you? Why did you not help to salve my wounds?” This sentence, this question, is spoken from the soul of the sufferer, although somewhat objectified by the paper with its inscription. The question arises, as it were, out of the worst moment of the whole process of suffering. With St. Anthony this suffering is more of a psychological nature, and for the sick person at the bottom left, more physical-psychological. But it is no accident that the two are there in the same picture. It is the moment in which the soul feels itself completely abandoned by God. In which it can say: if there is a higher power, then it is clearly not there now to stand by me. So therefore, it cannot exist! “God” is only a monstrous invention of human wishful thinking. The most intense process of suffering can lead us beyond doubt into despair and to a radical denial of everything higher. A situation of soul to which many, many people have come today, for whatever reasons.

We can think of the wars, of those who are still victims of torture. But however many forms the suffering takes, whether more physical, psychosomatic or purely psychological, it is the same general human and yet individual situation that Job already went through, in the story we know from the Old Testament. At the deepest point of his pain, when he is finally about to give up, his wife tells him that he should renounce his God, for Job is still cleaving to Him. “Renounce Him, and go to the other world!” St Anthony’s question, which is objectified and raised into the universal-human level, so that it does not remain a silent inner experience, but is visible to all – this question will also have pressed onlookers at that time to ask: What is that? Doesn’t the question also have to do with me? Isn’t it also *my own question*? And so every onlooker then and now can *identify* with the suffering of St. Anthony. That is, so to speak, the first act of therapy: identification with the suffering of another, through which suffering loses its natural tendency to egocentricity.

² http://www.kath-akademie-bayern.de/tl_files/Kath_Akademie_Bayern/Veroeffentlichungen/zur_debatte/pdf/2008/2008_02_casper_neu.pdf

IV.

And yet, we sense or know it already: such suffering is ultimately a test of our trust in God. So it was for Job, and so also for St. Anthony; so it is in the depths of every human soul. And this leads us to the second act of this monumental pictorial therapy. This is the answering of the question of suffering. But the answer is not painted; it should form itself within the soul of everyone who looks at the painting. Grünewald does not portray it in the picture, although, as we shall see, it was well-known to him.

There was in the Middle Ages a much-read book, the *Legenda Aurea* [*Golden Legend*] by Jacobus de Voragine, a 13th century Dominican monk. It is a collection of the lives of more famous and less well-known saints. It includes a life of St. Anthony. It describes his experience of temptation and contains the words of the sentence which Grünewald painted on the scrap of paper. The *Legenda Aurea* was very popular, well-known, work. Obviously also by Grünewald, who literally quoted from it. But Grünewald quotes – intentionally – only the question. He holds back the answer which is given in the *Legenda Aurea*. The viewer of the altar panel will as a rule not recognise it. This answer is: “Anthony, I was here. But I wanted to see your struggle. And as you have striven manfully, I shall make your name known throughout the whole world.” That is the answer that is missing from the piece of paper. The artist, who was also a great therapist of the soul, obviously wanted the viewer to live at first wholly in the question. One stricken by St. Anthony’s Fire – as the above-mentioned poisonous disease was called – will perhaps have turned to the Abbot for an answer to the agonizing question. And the Abbot may have indicated the answer from the *Legenda Aurea*, if it had not already arisen in the soul of the victim, at least in its meaning if not in its words.

V.

God’s answer to St. Anthony’s question makes things unmistakably clear: we are standing before a portrayal of a testing of trust in God or, as we could also say, trust in the spirit. And now we can turn to the question of how it was possible for St. Anthony to withstand the test. What holds him upright, even during the worst demonic attacks? Even in the moment when they threaten to tear his soul apart? The faces and gestures of the various demons express everything that the human being can carry within himself as lower astrality: stupidity, cunning craftiness, schadenfreude, obstinacy in the figurative and literal sense and much else besides. A

real pandemonium of the worst kind ... The whole horde are expecting that the one being tested will give up and surrender his soul to them to feed upon. One can feel that not much more and the victim will capitulate. And one can imagine what shrieks of joy would then howl through this soul scenery...



Armoured reptile with St. Anthony's Hand

When we look at the small piece of wood, which St. Anthony holds fast in his hand, although a bird-like and sharp-beaked reptile – an armoured lizard – is trying to bite through his fingers, in the same right hand which is holding on to the stick, St. Anthony is grasping a rosary. We can see five beads on it. This rosary is the link to the higher world, which even in the worst moment cannot be torn away. One who sincerely prays the rosary, maintains the link to the divine spiritual world, even if only through devotion and not through knowledge or vision. This means: St. Anthony does not lose trust in God even in the darkest moment of apparent abandonment by God.

VI.

Let us now look more closely at the elements of the composition of this altar panel. For with an artist like Grünewald nothing occurs by chance or haphazardly. The space of the picture is, as it were, a sacred space. Everything is in its right place and cannot be positioned elsewhere. Below we evidently have the earthly realm and space, or at least in indication. Roots penetrate the earth. The sick man on the left is crouching on the ground. The book, the plants, everything in the world of earth. Even the piece of paper is fixed to something physical. The drama in the centre plays out against

this in the world of the soul, to which the demons have access, especially when so much is at stake as in such a testing of the soul. We can also imagine this whole middle realm acoustically; here there is a raucous interpenetration of noises and screams – a real astral din. Space does not prevail here; time prevails here. Here every moment can be decisive for the further course of the inner soul process. Everything is a soul event in this pictorial realm, which reaches up to the burning timbers, on top of which a devil with a curved sword seeks to hold the *still higher* world in check. Another devil seems to be tumbling down empty-handed.

Out of the higher world, from the hand of a finely drawn and painted rider, a kind of spear descends, against which the devil's sword is broken. A Michael-motif! Michael is fighting against demons. Where is this fight taking place? There, where the soul world borders a still higher world, which we can call the *spiritual world*. This third, highest part of the picture clearly raises itself above the other two.

Significantly, this third world is missing in most reproductions of the painting, which usually only reach up to the world where the demonic attacks are taking place.

This demonic world stands closer to most of us! Even when we give ourselves up to illusions about it or lead a sleepy life. The portrayal of it fascinates us, and seems to many to be more interesting than the highest realm, in which peace reigns and in which the Father God seems to be enthroned, unmoved, above all turbulent happenings. How different is the whole mood in this third, still higher world, which reaches up to the top of the picture! This is the realm from which *the answer to St. Anthony's* question sounds. It is the realm to which the rosary in the depths of the earth keeps St. Anthony connected. The snow-covered mountains do

not only radiate firmness. They project into a world of timelessness, which we can also call the world of the *eternal*. One who never projects himself likewise into this world, whether through devotion, through spiritual understanding or through cognitive vision will hardly be able to get through the darkest 'St. Anthony moment' unscathed.

The uppermost area of the picture is harmonious, the middle area is dramatic, the lower area earthy and perishable. In the world of soul drama processes of pure degradation and destruction can be seen; in the spiritual part of the picture, a victorious battle is going on in the border region and above it reigns an unshakeable, sublime peace, as imperturbable as the towering rocks.

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Let us look briefly at two of the colours and what they express. Why is St. Anthony all in blue? In the midst of such dramatic, threatening action? Blue is a sign of serenity, but even more of piety, humility and trust in God that the one who is afflicted will not be abandoned even in the worst moment. In the moment when he does not yet know God's answer. Then up above we have a white, the colour of purity of soul. In the middle part of the picture there is white only in the saint's beard and in the piece of paper.

All that was presented to the sick patients, and many of them may have said to themselves: Yes, that's how it is for me. Only much worse! But St. Anthony does not give up, in his worst hour his trust in God grows; he literally holds fast to it. And that is no theoretical matter, nor a mere feeling. It is an impulse of his will.

VII.

Drawing the threads together, we can say: the three areas of the painting clearly show three regions of the world. below is the physical world with its physical space in which we can go about with our physical bodies which belong to this world. Then we are shown the world of the soul, which only indirectly belongs to space, insofar as it is bound to the body. But in itself it is not of a spatial but of a temporal nature. To employ spatial concepts for soul conditions is at most possible in a figurative sense. When someone speaks of a deep feeling, no-one would ask: how deep – five meters or ten meters? And when someone speaks of feeling a great joy, no-one would ask: about a cubic meter? Far beyond, we have, as I said, neither time nor space, but eternity, to use a somewhat outworn word, that is, a word which one usually imagines as an unimaginably long *time*. St. Anthony's holding onto the rosary shows that he has faith in this; beyond



Michael's fight against the Demon

all this turmoil and noise of destruction there is something that is utterly untouched by it. So he remains or rather, he places himself in the second world – the soul world – in connection with the third world. And that is ultimately a basic task of our whole existence – not to lose contact with the third world! Or if this happens, to regain that contact! Without an orientation to the third world, soul crises inevitably end in catastrophe: first within the soul itself, then as catastrophe also expressed in the outer world.

VIII.

What does all this do with evil, which I mentioned in my introduction? We have to do here with *manifestations* of evil, which work into the human soul - with evil forces and beings which cannot exercise their power over the physical and soul worlds nor over the spiritual world, even if they rage against it. The panel shows clearly that the demons are prevented from gaining access to the higher world. *At most, they can act out their evil as far as the boundary of the soul and spirit worlds.* The higher world is the place of absolute Goodness, in which neither struggle nor opposition rule, as they do in the soul world and the physical world. In this world spiritual beings rule, who apparently consider it necessary and wise to expose the human being to the assaults of evil – so that he can steel his trust in the total power, the total love and the total wisdom of this higher world. Everything that happens in the first and second worlds is observed, guided and authorised by the third world. Only in this way can the human being develop certain forces which he would never otherwise be able to build up.

In this connection I would like to come to a close by referring to some words that Rudolf Steiner once spoke in Berlin at the end of some considerations about evil.

These words belong, in my view, to the basic provenance of every human being who does not wish to weaken or even stumble on the path of struggle with evil. A provenance which can strengthen one so much that evil can be faced without fear or hatred, so that, even in the midst of a soul battle we can at the same time endeavour to consider everything from a higher, spiritual viewpoint. That is something that is very necessary today. For without such a viewpoint it will hardly be possible, when, for example, we hear of torture, not to fall into the motions of hatred and fear. Emotions, which beings like those which are attacking St. Anthony, would only be welcome soul fodder. The words spoken by Rudolf Steiners are: “Everything that is in the cosmic plan is good. And evil will only continue

for a certain time. So he who believes in the ‘eternity’ of evil is one who confuses the eternal with the temporal. And therefore one who does not rise from the temporal to the eternal can never understand evil.” These words are guidelines and a task at the same time. Can we then make this differentiation between the eternal and the temporal, on which so much evidently depends just like that? With the words “cosmic plan” we can think of what we see up there in Grünewald’s painting where God reigns. Up there the great lines of evolution are worked out. For example, that we are living now in a Michaelic age, one of the tasks of which is specifically *the knowledge of evil from the viewpoint of the eternal*; and to which tasks also belongs the insight that since 1899 we are again living in an Age of Light, although at the present time we seem to have arrived at the darkest point of this Age of Light.³ All of that is in the “cosmic plan”, in which everything is good, in which no opposition exists between good and evil, which only appears *in time*. There above, evil has no place. We can and must speak of an eternal Good.

To speak of an “eternal” evil is a nonsense for one who thinks clearly; as a concept it is a square circle or a piece of wooden iron. When we can no longer think the eternal in purity – and that has been intended for European development since the Council of 869, which “abolished” the spirit, then we cannot really even understand what evil is.

But then we would have to fall into evil all the more in one way or another. A basic task of Rudolf Steiner’s spiritual science is to learn to think anew about the eternal, the spiritual. Otherwise, we shall never be able to accomplish the basic task of our time – the knowledge of evil that storms against us on all sides, as the demons raged against the soul of St. Anthony. Grünewald’s St. Anthony altarpiece can therefore have a therapeutic effect not only in the sense I have outlined; it can also stimulate us to form a strong concept of the spiritual, of the eternal, of the cosmic plan – as strong as the grip of St. Anthony around the rosary.

For Grünewald was an initiate in the reality of the spiritual. His pictures can therefore serve as intensive stimulants on the search for the spirit.

IX.

Allow me in conclusion to make two more comments, one on Grünewald, and the other on the meaning of his St. Anthony panel for our time.

I pointed out to you the piece of paper with St. Anthony’s question, the answer to which Grünewald knew,

3 For further discussion of this, see my book *In The Sign of Five*.

but did not provide, quite deliberately. If he had painted God's answer, the dramatic tension would immediately have been enormously weakened. The extreme suffering would even become in a certain sense implausible. That could not be. Only the greatest tension, which lies in this *question*, can prepare one to receive the answer rightly.

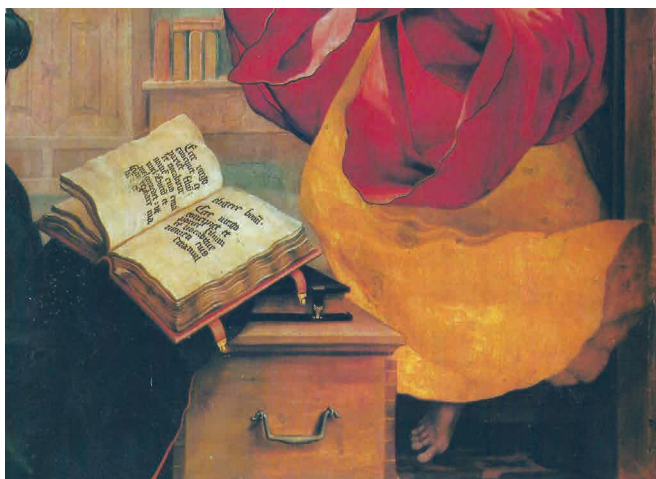
As consciously as Grünewald here *left out* the second part, the answer, so did he also, in his painting of the annunciation, just as consciously *twice paint* in the words, which Maria reads in the *Old Testament*, before the angel speaks to her, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and indeed in the key passage with exactly the same text. This certainly did not happen because the artist could not think of anything else to paint on the right side of the holy book open before Mary. The doubling of the words of the annunciation, which come from the book of Isaiah (7: 14), has a deep meaning. The words are: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." We have investigated the meaning of this doubling. The results have been published elsewhere.

Here it was only my intention to point out that Grünewald painted nothing by chance and left out nothing by chance. He painted nothing, not even in the slightest detail, without forethought. He was, along with many others, already at the relative beginning of the Age of the Consciousness Soul, a *master* in the handling of

across the abyss of the soul and the demonic world, can be laid just as surely if not more securely. While the rosary still has an outer character, the rose cross is built up step by step *within the soul* by the force of thinking. It can be regarded as a meditative embodiment of the older Rose Cross stream which has been transformed into modern spiritual science.⁴ It shows the modern spiritual seeker a secure path through the "Die and Become". Whereby, instead of "die", we can say: die to everything physical and psychological, insofar as it is *merely* transitory; and instead of "become", we can say: "eternalise yourself", that is, become conscious of the eternal in the world and in man. This rose cross, in which Rudolf Steiner exemplified the being of modern meditation in his *Occult Science - An Outline*, can no more be torn away from the meditator than the rosary can be wrenched from St. Anthony. The testing of the soul remains the same; the means of coping with it change in the course of time.

T.H. Meyer

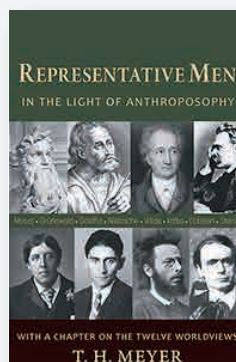
4 This comment seems to us permissible, in the knowledge that Grünewald had already taken up Rosicrucian impulses. One can think of the motif from the picture of the birth of Jesus where a rose-lined path can be seen which leads to a door, which is filled with a cross..



The Old Testament with words from the Prophet Isaiah

this modern soul force. The second point has to do with how the modern viewer relates to the way in which St. Anthony masters his soul crisis. Can we modern people still rely on the *rosary* and its spiritual power? Only a few can do this in an honest way. But if one places instead of the rosary the image of the *rose cross*, it can immediately become visible that the bridge up into the spiritual world,

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